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Secret Arms Programs Proliferate

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A Soviet observation satellite flies over Los Angeles each day to check out operations at any of half a dozen industrial plants involved in military projects that are the Pentagon's most classified.

"Every day they count the cars in my parking lot," said Ben Rich, a Lockheed Corp. executive who has presided over the production of whole fleets of secret aircraft.

"So, how many cars does Rich have in his Burbank parking lot?" "I can't tell you that. It's secret," he replied.

But the Soviets should already know that Lockheed has as many as 10,000 workers building a new fleet of aircraft that utilize Stealth technology.

Secret Spy Satellites

Across town, TRW Inc. has 17,000 workers in the Redondo Beach region, largely building secret spy satellites such as the Magnum eavesdropping satellite that was sent up in the space shuttle earlier this year, according to industry sources.

And in Palmdale, an imposing iron structure is rising off the Mojave Desert that will apparently be the final assembly center of the advanced technology bomber, another secret program.

All of these facilities and similar ones throughout the nation are part of an industrial network, almost a separate economy, that serves a rapidly expanding agenda of secret Defense Department programs.

While almost every weapon involves some classified information—the range of a torpedo, for instance—many of these programs are so highly classified that their very existence is not acknowledged. Even in the case of the Stealth bomber, which has been officially disclosed, its costs, quantities and production timetable are top secret.

Beyond Public Scrutiny

This so-called "black" world of military programs has become nearly a \$30-billion industry—based largely in California—that encompasses tens of thousands of employees working under Pentagon clearances and beyond public scrutiny.

Funding for such secret Pentagon procurement and research has increased sixfold between the last year of the Carter Administration in 1980 and the upcoming Reagan Administration budget for 1986.

And the proportion of the Defense Department budget for procurement and research that is classified has increased to 20% from 10%, according to former Under Secretary of Defense Richard D. DeLauer.

The growth of black programs is part of an even broader trend toward greater secrecy at the Pentagon, which has restricted access to certain key budget documents that previously were open to the public, limited the exchange of academic knowledge in U.S. colleges, and curtailed exports of commercial products on national security grounds.

The Pentagon contends that greater secrecy is necessary to maintain leadership in weapons that rely on advanced technologies in electronics, optics and materials.

With such weapons becoming the norm rather than the exception, the nation is now producing ever more major systems in secret. Among them are an intercontinental nuclear bomber, a tactical jet fighter, a variety of spacecraft and space weapons, cruise missiles, computers, radars and even some tactical missiles.

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But the sharp turn toward greater secrecy at the Pentagon, critics say, has important implications for a democracy that depends on public oversight. The Pentagon is seeking to avoid scrutiny, they contend, blocking the public's access to information on programs that probably are no secret to Soviet intelligence.

Limited Competition

Of direct impact to taxpayers, critics add, black programs are significantly more costly because of staggering security costs and limited business competition.

Concern over such programs has not been limited to traditional Pentagon critics. They include usually staunch defenders of the Pentagon and individuals responsible for major contributions to the nation's weapons technology.

"I believe we have classified too much," said Edward Teller, the scientist who played a key role in developing the hydrogen bomb and a major advocate of President Reagan's "Star Wars" plan. "Secrecy is a measure that hurts our opponents a little and us a great deal."

Teller and other critics worry that increased reliance on secret programs ultimately could prove dangerous to the economy and national security.

'Looks Like Absurdity'

"In nuclear weapons, where we had the greatest of secrecy, the Soviets are now ahead of us," Teller said. "In electronics, where we had very little government secrecy, we are way ahead of others, particularly the Soviets. It looks like an absurdity, but who is ahead depends not only what they learn from us but on the speed of our own development."

Scientists and academics argue that economic and technological development in capitalist economies has always depended on the flow of information and the exchange of scientific knowledge.

"It is open communication that tests ideas and exposes the bad ones," said Robert Rosenzweig, president of the Assn. of American Universities, which has fought Pentagon efforts to restrict the exchange of even unclassified information. "It is not the case that

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